

Study Nine

CONSIDER YOUR CALL

In commencing this study, it seems good to begin with a point made at the end of the last topic. Walking worthily of God's call must involve drawing attention to the worth of the Caller rather than the called. This study shows that self awareness and realism in regard to our creatureliness, are important aspects of appreciating the significance of God's call. All too readily, the fruit of God's call are attributed to one's own actions or energies, resulting in an impoverished view of the nature of God's call.

Paul, in I Corinthians, takes up this issue (chapters 1–4). Jesus also had to deal with the egotism of his disciples, and it becomes in a variety of ways, a recurring theme in the epistles. It can therefore be appreciated that to understand and remember our condition and circumstance when called by God, is part of the study of Christian basics.

THE CORINTHIAN PROBLEM

Paul told the Corinthians that to those who were called, Christ was the power of God and the wisdom of God. However, they were unable to appreciate this incredible truth because they were behaving like ordinary men, jealously striving among themselves and taking sides. In the process they had set up certain men as those whom they were following and effectively emptied the cross of Christ of its power. The fact that they were quarrelling was not significant in itself, but rather that it withdrew attention from Christ, whom God made to be their wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. There could not be two foci of attention; each was mutually exclusive.

The Corinthians were not simply appreciating a variety of ministries, which would have been quite natural, but were boasting of the rightness of their own views, as represented by certain men. This was not 'contending for the faith', but giving a prestige to men that was idolatrous.

Later, as shown in the second epistle (II Corin. 11:16–21), the Corinthians showed a similar tendency in glorying in certain teachers who demanded great things of them. Indirectly this brought glory to themselves, and again, detracted from the sufficiency of Christ. Such teachers assessed themselves by comparing themselves with others (II Corin. 10:12). They wanted to think they had value apart from Christ.

THE HUMAN PROBLEM

The difficulty that surfaced at Corinth is in fact universal. God reminded the children of Israel on the eve of their entry into Palestine, that it was not because they were more numerous than other nations or because they were upright in character that God was favouring them (Deut. 7:7f.; 9:5).

Either physical prowess or moral rectitude could have been reasons for Israel to boast, and God showed them they possessed neither. They had neither might nor right, but only his favour.

In the book of Romans, Paul takes care to demolish the idea that either pagan or Jew could boast before God and concludes that the whole world is morally accountable to God (Rom. 3:19f.).

In the physical realm, Paul tells Timothy to warn the rich not to be haughty (I Tim. 6:17–19) and James warns the church not to aid and abet the process of human glory by honouring the rich man more than the poor man (James 2:1–7).

Everywhere and in all ages, men have and will make golden calves of aesthetic, moral, academic, physical, or status achievements and, in effect, break the first commandment, and rob the gospel of its power.

A SPECIFICALLY RELIGIOUS PROBLEM

One would think that preoccupation with appearances would be less of a problem to those who profess a religious faith—but in fact it simply takes on a different colour. The Pharisees were notoriously addicted to outward show, and the whole Jewish race was caught in a trap of supposed law keeping (Rom. 2:17–24). The Judaisers who attempted to infiltrate the church did so in order to make ‘a good showing in the flesh’ (Gal. 6:12f.), and made a fuss of the Galatians in order that they themselves may be congratulated (Gal. 4:17). Other sects similarly appealed to what would appear noble in the eyes of men (Col. 2:8–10, 13, 23).

THE EXPERIENCE OF JESUS

It is a very well celebrated fact that Jesus came into the world in the humblest of circumstances, and if he was ever in danger of forgetting it, his enemies, and friends, helped him to remember. Nathaniel said: ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1:46) His fellow countrymen said: ‘Where did this man get all this . . . Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James . . .’ (Mark 6:2f.). The Jews marvelled and said, ‘How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?’ (John 7:15.) His followers, later on, were noted as uneducated, common men (Acts 4:13).

So in Jesus, the prophecy of Isaiah came true! ‘He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.’ He was ‘as one from whom men hide their faces’ (Isa. 53:1–3). He had to tell would be followers that he had no home (Matt. 8:20). He and his followers were provided for by others (Luke 8:2f.).

These facts could gather about them a certain attraction based on the superficial observation that Jesus became like ourselves and experienced our poverty. But in fact, in his lowly status, he is very much unlike us. He did not ‘put up’ with poverty or lack of education. For him these factors had no significance, and it is this that should gather our attention. He did not think

equality with God was a thing to be grasped, much less earthly glory (Phil. 2:6–10).

By contrast the Pharisees loved recognition by men (Matt. 23:1–12; Luke 14:7–14) and therefore could not understand what Jesus was saying (John 5:44). They particularly sought religious recognition, making their situation all the more complicated and misleading and odious. Their reasoning in regard to the validity of Jesus' teaching was: 'Have any of the authorities or any of the Pharisees believed in him?' (John 7:47f.; cf. the apostles Acts 4:23–31). If we think that the gospel is discredited because it can only attract the poorer classes of people, or that it is adorned by those it gathers from the ranks of nobility, the educated, and the powerful, we have misunderstood the gospel. It is clear that the gospel is not to be judged by those it can attract.

Jesus recognised that those who heard his word were 'babes' and that the wise and prudent had gone away empty. That is, it was not the essentially ignorant who received the word, but those that the world saw in that way, and particularly so because they believed in Jesus. And the wise and understanding would have been those who thought themselves to be so, or were seen in that way by their fellows, not those who were essentially wise and understanding. Jesus did not regret this but thanked God that it was so, recognising it as God's gracious will. (Matt. 11:25–27; cf. I Corin. 2:6–9).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contradicted all earthly whims concerning human grandeur in the beatitudes by congratulating the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, and the persecuted (Matt. 5:3–12). Luke records the more social aspects of Jesus' teaching and writes: 'Blessed are you poor, . . . you that hunger now' and 'you that weep now'. Jesus continued by saying: 'Woe to you that are rich, . . . that are full now . . . that laugh now' and 'when all men speak well of you' (Luke 6:17–26). It is clear that the possession of this world's power and property leads frequently, though not inevitably, to trust in these things. Here lies the dilemma of those who through righteousness tend to prosperity, and who through prosperity tend to idolatry. The subtle lie is thus believed, which says that while one is doing well there is no need for repentance, and it is left more often than not, to those who have no illusions of grandeur, morally or economically to be honest about their sin and come into the kingdom (Matt. 9:9–13). This also helps us to understand why the 'common people' heard Jesus gladly (Mark 12:37).

Among the disciples themselves there were cherished egotisms which Jesus found it difficult to dislodge. After they had debated their relative positions in the echelons of discipleship, Jesus told them that the greatest must be the least and the servant of all, and that by receiving a child in his name they would entertain deity (Mark 9:33–41). However the disciples later rejected certain children being brought to Jesus (Mark 10:13–16). Later again, Jesus received a delegation from the Zebedee family requesting honours for James and John (Mark 10:35–45 with Matt. 20:20–28). Presumably, they wanted to settle the status debate still going on among the apostles. Jesus showed them that their preoccupation reflected the manner of earthly rule, but in no way resembled his own.

At the end of Jesus' teaching ministry, the disciples still seem not to have captured Jesus' indifference to human prestige and were embarrassed by Jesus washing their feet (judging by Peter's reaction—John 13:1–20). In so doing, Jesus sought to remove their hankering for worldly dignity. He taught them to do such menial things for each other and to receive whoever he sent to them. The reference to Judas in this context suggests that he was looking for a Messiah with the show of worldly authority and that he had been repulsed by the truth Jesus was revealing.

THE CORINTHIAN SOLUTION

It is this Jesus, and this teaching of Jesus, that Paul brought to bear on the Corinthian situation. He began by showing that human wisdom had not led anyone to God, but what the world saw as foolishness had (I Corin. 1:21). He continued by pointing to their own creaturely status when converted which gave them little to be proud of in the world, and showed that in fact it pleased God to take what was foolish, weak, low and despised in the world, and even what did not exist, in order to reveal his own glory. This was so that those who boasted could only really boast of the Lord (I Corin. 1:26–29; cf.; Eph. 2:8f.). He counselled the Corinthians not to be greatly perturbed about improving their religious or social status either, as though there was some merit in doing so (I Corin. 2:17–24).

The Corinthian love for recognition had intruded itself into their churches, causing them to find status in identification with certain Christian teachers. Paul said: 'Let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos . . .' (I Corin. 3:18–23). They needed to understand that the wisdom of God tended to unity, not disintegration (I Corin. 1:10; cf.; Eph. 2:14 – 3:10).

Paul used himself and other leaders as examples of staying within creaturely limits (I Corin. 4:6f.). Any leader, he said, could only do what a man can do—God is the one to be wondered at (I Corin. 3:5–9). In fact, he spoke of the weakness, and ill-repute which he suffered as their father in the faith, (I Corin. 4:9–16; cf.; II Corin. 4:7–12 and Acts 18:9), all of which reminded Paul, and should have reminded the Corinthians that they were dependent creatures. Paul preached not with human eloquence, but in the power of the Spirit, so that their confidence would be in God and not man. (I Corin. 1:17; 2:4, 13). In the second Corinthian letter he noted that while he was not unskilled in knowledge, he may have been in speech (II Corin. 11:5f.). He also referred, when writing to the Galatians, to a bodily ailment that was a trial to them (Gal. 4:13f). In a lengthy section of II Corinthians (chapters 10–13), he proceeded to disclose what could be seen as his prowess among the apostles, not because he set any store by it, but because the Corinthians so foolishly did. (cf. Phil. 3:2–11). But he showed that he would prefer to boast of his weaknesses, because it was in knowing his weakness that he was strong. He could see that the 'thorn in his flesh' was given to remind him always of his humanity and dependence. He also was aware of a certain inferiority to other apostles because he formerly persecuted the church (I Corin. 15:9).

In all these ways, Paul showed that he had the same spirit as his Master in refusing to give any more than incidental importance to creaturely status.

LIVING AS A REDEEMED CREATURE

The problem of man is that in trying to exceed the glory assigned to him, he fell short of that glory, and the continuing problem of man is that he still tries to exceed that glory, avoiding as long as he can, the fact that he has never reached it.

The triumph of the gospel is that the glory of sonship has been restored to those who are in Christ, and the gospel continues to triumph as men continue to walk in the light of their calling, knowing they have nothing to glory in other than that they reflect the glory of the Son.

In becoming sons of God, man does not lose his dependency but puts it into operation constantly. He is happy that God will not give his glory to another (Isa. 42:8), does not rebel against God by trusting in man (Jer. 17:5), aware that all achievements come by the Spirit (Zech. 4:6). He knows he is a son, not by virtue of his heritage or any human factor at all, but because of God (John 1:11). Therefore he cannot make distinctions between men by virtue of race (Acts 10:28), or position (James 2:2–4). He is totally a creation of God, called into existence out of what did not exist (Rom. 4:17; cf. Heb. 11:3).

As such, he can have a sane estimate of his abilities (Rom. 12:3–8), knowing that whatever he has is from the Lord and to be used as there is need in the church or the world (I Corin. 4:7; 12:7). In this spirit, Paul said he would not over extend himself in ministering to the Corinthians, but keep to the limits assigned to him (II Corin. 10:7–18). So there is no need for a believer to have a false humility or preoccupation with unworthiness. In fact it would be good to be wary of any who were 'working at' being humble. One does not need to work at what is already true, so the one who works shows that he is covering up a proud spirit.

CONCLUSION

If men, are so prone to make much of their creaturely abilities and achievements, and if religious men are so adept at turning their other-worldliness into a this-worldly form, Christians need constantly to consider their calling. That is, they need to have a clear understanding of what they were and are and what they can do and can't do as redeemed human beings. And in understanding that they have been called by God to be his people, they need to beware of losing their awareness of creatureliness. The treasure we have is in an earthen vessel, and is meant to be that way, that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God. Presumably, in the life to come, we shall not be tempted to glory except in the glory of the Father and the Son, and we will be safely entrusted with bodies that do not have their present limitations.